

## **Behind Every Door**

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**Isaiah 49:1-11**

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I've been having an argument with myself all week. Those of you who follow the "Accidental Pilgrim" blog will already be aware of this. I've been asking the question "Is it possible to give thanks for afflictions?"

Granted, we can thank God in our afflictions, if only to be grateful that they aren't worse than they are, but can we ever give thanks to God for them?

It's been a knockdown drag-out argument, with no settled answer. And, just so you're clear from the beginning of this sermon, I have no answer to this question today. But, I think we'll be able to sharpen the question more.

This week I asked my dear friend Bill Troutt, past President of Rhodes College and one of the most astute spiritual thinkers I know, if he would help me think about this question. Bill and I sat on Thursday morning like two cats in the warm winter sunlight by the window of a favorite coffee shop and talked and thought together.

In response to my query, Bill said something really profound. He said: "If you drove down Saint Charles Avenue, you can be sure that there is suffering and loss somewhere behind every door."

We can be a pretty stoical lot. We've been trained to be. It's part of the code we adhere to. So we may not mention our hurts or our griefs, even when we are with friends. We may keep them buried deep inside. We may even do our weeping inside. But make no mistake, as the Spanish existentialist philosopher Miguel de Unamuno once wrote, "The chief sanctity of every temple is that it is a place we go to weep together." Even if our weeping remains unseen by our neighbors, we come together here so that our weeping may be hallowed.

One of my favorite teachers of mindfulness, whom I have mentioned before, Jack Kornfield, often asks his audiences, "How many of you have had lives of uninterrupted happiness with no troubles at all? If so, you can have your ticket price refunded because you don't need to hear anything I'm going to say." I've yet to hear of anyone getting their money back.

But as ubiquitous as suffering, illness and grief are, so many of the common comforts of piety ring hollow. "It's all for the best," we may be told. "God has a reason for everything that happens," someone will say. "God will never place more on us than we can bear," says another. And, we've all heard the secular version of comfort, memorialized by Ernest Hemingway, "The world breaks everyone, but some grow back stronger at the broken places."

Theologically, despite the fact that I deeply respect John Calvin, the founder of our Reformed movement, I cannot and will not attribute to God all the breakage. I think Hemingway is closer to the truth on this one. Although Calvin's said it was impious to say so, I think there's just a lot of luck, bad and good, in life.

From one generation to another, a mutation in a tiny bit of DNA code, ushers a family into a nightmare that lasts for years.

A drunk driver crosses onto the wrong side around a curve on a two lane road in rural Maine, and a father and son die instantly just as the son's life is about to enter its most exciting phase.

Mr. Einstein, I think, is as wrong as Mr. Calvin: something does roll the universal dice. And sometimes we just have to pick up the pieces. But I don't think God does bad things to good, bad or indifferent people. As our Lord Jesus said, "The rain falls on the just and the unjust."

And, yet, if you walk into the vast majority of Protestant Christian churches in our country today, you wouldn't get that impression at all. In fact, you aren't likely to hear about death, or grief, or loss, or serious illnesses, or job layoffs, unless there's an inspiring moral to a sad story, some twist in the end that reassures us that the God who undoubtedly numbers every hair on your head also will make sure they don't fall out.

I may have mentioned this to you before, but a military chaplain reported a couple of years ago that one of the most common problems he faces when deployed to a war zone is the lack of spiritual depth of so many of his young soldiers. Even if they've grown up in churches, he has found this to be true, because most of them grew up in churches, he said, where the creed is relentlessly cheerful. For them, Christianity is happy and clappy, slick slogans and fun choruses, full of praise but lacking lament. Led by their teachers and preachers to believe that Jesus is the Sunshine God, they are not equipped to navigate "the valley of the shadow of death" which every human being inevitably faces, and sometimes in a variety of forms.

I wish I could say this is only true in a very small proportion of churches. But, it's widespread.

One of the most startling facts ever to dawn upon me began to peek over the horizon of my consciousness in a workshop with Walter Brueggemann about thirty-five years ago. We were at MoRanch. Walt at that time had not yet moved to Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta. At that point he had only written a fraction of the books he would eventually write.

Our workshop was on the Psalms of Lament. That class ignited a love for the Psalms that became a lifelong passion for me, and the inspiration for two books of my own. But, even more important, that class opened my eyes to a foundational obligation of our faith to teach us to face reality.

Walt taught us that although the Psalms of Lament make-up the overwhelming majority of the Psalms in the Bible, they seldom feature in our lectionary and usually are restricted to just a few worship settings, such as Good Friday. The Church doesn't seem to have much use for lament.

Why? I began to ask myself.

What I began to realize, only slowly, was that this fact was a symptom of something much more profound about us and something that seriously distorts our reading of The Bible and our living faithfully.

The Bible, itself, reads like a catalogue of suffering and abandonment, fears and worries, bloodshed, loss and anxiety over loss, captivity, slavery, exile; it tells of homes and places of worship destroyed, children and the helpless slaughtered. Indeed, if we flee to the Bible to escape from the six o'clock news we will be sadly disappointed.

Which has meant that we've grown increasingly selective about our use of the Bible. We use it to reinforce our cultural and social assumptions, in other words, what we already believe. Incidentally, I find this dynamic as operative in Bible churches as in mainline Protestant congregations, among so-called conservative biblical literalists as well as among so-called liberals. Virtually every group has selected its own functional canon within the canon of scriptures and conveniently discarded those bits of the Bible that don't fit in with their view of the world, a view of the world that is not so much optimistic, as simply a denial of reality.

Which is why, when a text like ours today in Isaiah comes our way, we ought to pay attention to it. The text before us today speaks of "the suffering servant," Isaiah's powerful meditation on the promised messiah who will redeem Israel and be a light to the gentiles.

This messiah will, we are told in Isaiah, be despised and abhorred by the world. The world will rise up to break the suffering servant of the Lord. Even after the Lord God says to the suffering servant, "You are my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified." The servant replies to the Lord, "I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing."

These are words that might have been spoken by Job, sitting among the ruin and wreckage of his shattered world, grieving over the death of those he loved, abandoned by friends and neighbors.

These words could be spoken by the whole people of ancient Israel, not just once, but repeatedly through history, emerging from one captivity into another, surviving barely from one exile to another, rebuilding their villages and towns and temple after destruction by one empire only to have them laid waste by another.

These words, of course, for Christians have long been claimed for Jesus whom we believe to be the Messiah, who healed the sick and was a friend of sinners, who returned no one evil for evil but came to reveal God's mercy and love, and was put to death by Rome on a cross.

The lesson seems clear, if we want to hear it, that the life Jesus lived will not garner the world's applause. And yet... and yet.... in spite of the consistent witness of the Bible: We have a very hard time exploring the lamentable aspects of our existence, unless, that is, we can quickly change the scenes in our drama from tragedy to comedy, unless we can guarantee a *post haste* "happily ever after."

We are in such a hurry to get to Christmas, we hardly take thought of Advent, although that is where we live everyday of our lives, "between the times," "Zwischen den Zeiten," "for the time being."

We get so distracted by the arrival of the Wise Men at Epiphany, that we tend to gloss over the fact that their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh made it possible for Mary and Joseph to

flee as refugees to a foreign country to escape a king bent upon slaughtering all the babies in the region in an attempt to kill the baby Jesus.

We want so badly to get to Easter, we don't notice that Lent is the theme of Jesus's whole life, the life to which he calls us, culminating in his Passion.

In our pursuit of happiness, by giving into our tendency to deny and avoid and distract ourselves from the pain that clutters so many of the rooms of our own homes, we make ourselves less capable of dealing with life both sanely and faithfully.

The question, "What can be made of this beautiful wreckage of life?" deserves an answer from the depths of our faith. But we can't answer this question until we are prepared to recognize the reality of the wreck, and the need to ask the question. Ah, and one thing more: until we are prepared to bring the question into the presence of God. That, my friends, is the whole point of lament. Nothing, not grief, nor anger, nor cursing the wind is beyond the scope of our consciousness of the presence of God.

The suffering servant of the Lord speaks to the Lord of his suffering, his affliction; he laments frankly to God, holding nothing back. "I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing, and in vain."

These words can translate into any language, into the language of grief and loss; into the language of sickness and death; into the language of toil and labor; into the language of whatever affliction breaks the heart and threatens the soul. And it all becomes, in the presence of God, prayer.

Yes, the world wounds. Yes, though we love life, relish its flavors and sights, and adore its beauty in all its forms, we confess also with the poet, Louise Gluck that not even death can harm us "more than you have harmed me, my beloved life."

We don't have to attribute our afflictions to God. God suffers with us. Nor do we have to burden each suffering moment to teach us some higher truth, though the wise do seem to learn so much when tears fall upon them. But let us remember, and never forget, what the suffering servant says, Tevye-like, in his reply to the Lord: "Yet surely my judgement is with the Lord, and my work rests with God."